

The US puts “regime change” in Iran on agenda

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As part of its drive for punitive new sanctions over Iran’s nuclear programs, the Obama administration launched a major diplomatic offensive in the Middle East this week to enlist the support of its allies in the region. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, Central Command head General David Petraeus and top State Department officials are taking part in the operation.

Clinton expounded the central theme of the US campaign before an audience of students at the Carnegie Mellon University’s satellite campus in Doha, Qatar on Monday. In a barely disguised appeal to opposition in Tehran’s ruling circles, she declared that Iran was in danger of military takeover by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

“We see that the government of Iran, the supreme leader, the president, the parliament, is being supplanted, and that Iran is moving towards a military dictatorship,” Clinton told her audience. She reiterated the point to journalists as she flew from Qatar to Saudi Arabia, saying: “I think the trend with this greater and greater military lock on the leadership decisions should be disturbing to Iranians, as well as to those of us on the outside.”

Clinton drove home the same point in Saudi Arabia. She told the press that Iran’s leading clerics and political figures must “take back the authority which they should be exercising on behalf of the people”. Clinton’s comments, which are obviously aimed at driving a political wedge into the Iranian regime, go hand-in-hand with Washington’s plans to specifically target new sanctions against the Revolutionary Guard. Previously, the Obama administration had mooted crippling economic sanctions, including a ban on the sale of refined petroleum products. Now it appears to have concluded that such penalties would alienate the people it is seeking to enlist against the IRGC.

While Clinton did not use the phrase “regime change,”

Obama’s national security adviser, retired general James Jones, was not so hesitant. “We know that internally [in Iran] there is a very serious problem,” he told Fox News Sunday. “We’re about to add to that regime’s difficulties, by engineering, participating in very tough sanctions, which we support. Not mild sanctions. There are very tough sanctions. A combination of those things could well trigger a regime change—it’s possible.”

The Obama administration has clearly decided to recalibrate its strategy. In the process, the US is modifying its previous campaign—following Iran’s presidential elections last June—in support of the so-called “Green Revolution” led by defeated opposition candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi. By focussing on the Revolutionary Guards, Washington is trying to seek out bases of discontent in the highest echelons of the regime, including those close to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Clinton’s overture has nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of ordinary Iranians. Rather the aim is to consolidate an opposition among layers of businessmen, bureaucrats and even military officers with grievances against the Revolutionary Guard, which has certainly extended its economic and political influence under President Ahmadinejad, but is far from controlling the government. Like Moussavi, the “leading clerics and political figures” to whom Clinton is appealing, all support the Islamic regime and have backed its repressive methods in the past.

Not surprisingly, Tehran publicly rejected Clinton’s remarks. Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki reportedly “raised questions about the United States military dictatorship in the region”, referring to the continuing US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. “Those who have been the very symbol of military dictatorships over the past decades, since the Vietnam war until now, see everyone else in the same way,” he said.

President Ahmadinejad warned on Tuesday against further sanctions, saying: “Something will be done in response that will make them [the countries involved] regret it.” At the same time, he reiterated Iran’s offer to go through with an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) deal reached last year to exchange low-enriched uranium for fuel rods for its research reactor in Tehran. He insisted, however, that the exchange should be simultaneous. Tehran recently warned it would enrich uranium to 20 percent and manufacture its own rods if the deal fell through.

The US has previously rejected any modification to the IAEA agreement. In her comments, Clinton ruled out further negotiations. Speaking in Qatar, she asserted that Iran was constructing a nuclear weapon, then added, “we don’t want to be engaging [with Tehran] while they are building their bomb”. She provided no new evidence to support her claim, which Iran has repeatedly denied.

While denying that Washington was planning war against Iran, Clinton declared: “[W]e will certainly defend countries in the Gulf who face the greatest immediate threat from Iran.” Four Gulf states—Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates—have recently acquired additional anti-missile defence systems from the US.

In a bid to consolidate the support of the Gulf States behind the US, Clinton warned of the dangers of a nuclear arms race and regional instability if Iran had a nuclear weapon. Students in the audience challenged her cynical declaration that the Middle East should remain free of nuclear weapons. They asked whether the US intended to demand that Israel dismantle its nuclear arsenal.

While Clinton was in the Middle East, General Petraeus was in Saudi Arabia for talks about military cooperation. Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mullen visited Israel for talks with the Israeli military before heading to Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Mullen’s mission appears to have been to restrain Israel from attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities, at least while the US is pressing its diplomatic and political offensive. He warned that any unilateral Israeli strike would be self-defeating.

Top US State Department officials James Steinberg and Jacob Lew have been allocated the task of drumming up support. Lew left last weekend for Egypt, Israel and Jordan. Steinberg is due to travel to Israel next week for talks that are expected to focus on Iran. William Burns, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, will travel to

Lebanon and Syria next week. He is aiming to loosen Syria’s ties to Iran and also secure Lebanese support for a sanctions resolution in the UN Security Council.

The US has the backing of Britain and France for tough UN sanctions, with indications that Russia is considering its support. Intense US pressure is being applied to the only other permanent UN Security Council, China, to fall into line. Washington is also stepping up its own unilateral sanctions against Iran. Last week the US Treasury Department froze the assets within its jurisdiction of four companies controlled by the Revolutionary Guards, as well as of a commander, General Rostam Qasemi, who oversees the IRGC’s construction and engineering arm, Khatam al-Anbiya.

As if on cue, the American media has begun to swing behind Clinton’s new propaganda line. A comment published in yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal* entitled “Iran’s emerging military dictatorship,” chimed in. “Perhaps it is time to consider regime change a possibility,” it declared. “Even so-called realists must concede that the Khomeinist establishment, under the emerging leadership of the IRGC, is not the only actor on the Iranian scene. There is another actor: the popular movement for change.”

The Obama administration’s belligerent stance is encouraging openly militarist sections of the American political establishment to demand even tougher measures. In a comment in the *Wall Street Journal* last week entitled “The case for striking Iran grows,” the Bush administration’s former ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, declared: “America’s central focus must be to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons in the first place. Doing so requires decisive, and likely military, action now, since there is essentially no likelihood that an Obama-inspired ‘regime of sanctions’ will achieve that objective.”

While the Obama administration currently appears intent on pursuing “regime change” in Tehran, it continues to keep all options on the table, including military attacks. Washington’s reckless efforts to political destabilise the Iranian regime will only heighten tensions throughout the regime and increase the danger of war.



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